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ABSTRACT

The primary goal of presidential crisis rhetoric appears to be the unification of the people of the United States in support of presidential policy. John F. Kennedy's crisis speaking corresponded both to his conceptions of presidential leadership and to those of the people. If the President of the United States is seen as the personification of the people, no more illustrative example of this kind of identification can be found than in Kennedy's crisis rhetoric. In both the Berlin crisis and the Cuban missile crisis speeches, Kennedy joined the idea of his will and wishes for resolution of the crises with those of the people. He put himself in the position of moral leader and spokesman for the nation by casting the issues under discussion in the mold of basic democratic ideology. He fulfilled his role as public educator while simultaneously urging support for his policies. An analysis of his rhetoric reveals that it performed well in moments of crisis. His speeches succeeded in securing the approval of the people and he triumphed in demonstrating the courage he admired in great leaders. (FL)

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"A Watchman on the Walls of World Freedom":

The International Crisis Speaking of John F. Kennedy

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We in this country, in this generation, are, by destiny rather than choice, the watchmen on the walls of world freedom.[1]

"A Watchman on the Walls of World Freedom":
The International Crisis Speaking of John F. Kennedy

Examination of contemporary presidential speaking necessarily involves consideration of the office of the presidency and the attitudes of the president toward fulfillment of his role in that office. The mutual interaction of the man and the office makes assessment of presidential speaking particularly challenging. Surrounded by myth and grandeur, power and prestige, the office of the presidency is a somewhat static institution; one that is constrained by the American conception of the presidency and bound by tradition and precedent. The presidency, as Clinton Rossiter observes, "unites power, drama and prestige as does no other office in the world."[2] Its greatness, he contends, "lies in the truth that it is not just an office of incredible power but a breeding ground of indestructible myth."[3] Yet the presidency is a personal as well as a public institution. It is subject to modification by the unique perceptions of the man who holds the office. In Arthur Schlesinger's observation, it changes "shape, intensity and ethos according to the man in charge."[4]

Certainly, examination of presidential rhetoric is nothing new. Scholars have devoted a fair amount of critical attention to the speaking of all our contemporary presidents. John F. Kennedy is no exception. Kennedy's speaking provides excellent material for rhetorical investigation seemingly because of his oratorical abilities and, no doubt because of his early and unfortunate demise. Yet, despite all that has been written about Kennedy, little attention has been given to his crisis speaking. Only two studies have been found in the field of Speech Communication that deal directly with Kennedy's speaking in crisis situations, and these studies contradict each other on several pertinent

issues.[5] While this paper will examine the international crisis speaking of John F. Kennedy, it does not address itself directly to conflicting views in the literature. Rather, it seeks to illuminate the international crisis speaking of a president whose tenure in office was particularly marked by crisis situations. To aid in further understanding the purpose of this kind of speaking and Kennedy's crisis speaking in particular, attention will first be given to key elements in the American concept of the presidency, in Kennedy's view of the presidency and in his view of effective leadership during crisis situations. Theodore Windt's model of presidential international crisis speaking will then be employed in an analysis of Kennedy's speeches on the Berlin Crisis (July 25, 1961) and on the Cuban Quarantine (October 22, 1962).[6] These speeches were chosen for analysis because they were given at differing times within the span of Kennedy's Administration. The Berlin Crisis speech was given early in Kennedy's tenure while the Cuban Quarantine address occurred after Kennedy had occupied the Oval Office for some time. In choosing crisis speeches arising from distinct periods of the Kennedy Administration, more accurate generalizations may be possible regarding Kennedy's crisis speaking as a whole.

The American Concept of the Presidency

The American concept of the presidency embodies not only power and privilege but the personification of the American ideal, as well. Rossiter notes that the president "is the one-man distillation of the American people"; that he is "the symbol of our sovereignty, continuity and grandeur. He reigns, but he also rules; he symbolizes the people, but he also runs their government."[7]

In conjunction with the idea of president-as-ruler, the American concept of the presidency includes the notion of president-as-moral leader and educator.

Franklin Roosevelt remarked that at the very least, the presidency was not simply an administrative office: "It is," he said, "more than an engineering job, efficient or inefficient. It is pre-eminently a place of moral leadership."[8] Thomas Cronin asserts that "most Americans now believe . . . that the presidency is a 'bully pulpit.'"[9] Leadership of this kind implies the need for education. The attitudes of the American public are probed in conjunction with the educational effort on the part of the president. Theodore Sorensen remarks that every president finds it necessary to understand the "state of American public opinion," not arising from his need to "reflect it like a barometer but because his task is to lead it, educate it, and mobilize it behind what he believes to be the national interest."[10]

Kennedy's Concept of the Presidency

Kennedy's view of the presidency was, according to most accounts, closely tied to the accepted American idea of the office. Lewis Paper argues that "like all presidents, Kennedy was guided by . . . the historical trends which make the presidential office what it is today."[11] Such an assertion may appear to be at odds with accounts of the Kennedy administration that picture the tenure of the young president as one marked by innovation and change. Yet it must be remembered that Kennedy had no previous experience with the executive branch of government. Despite the fourteen years he served in Congress, he was unfamiliar with the constraints of executive leadership. He had "to rely on his ideas and ideals more than some previous presidents who could depend . . . on their reactions to past executive problems as guidelines for meeting presidential dilemmas."[12]

Kennedy's view of politics speaks much about his views on the presidency. In Profiles in Courage he writes that politics is "the fine art of conciliating,

balancing and interpreting the forces and factions of public opinion, an art essential to keeping our nation united and enabling our Government to function."[13] As president, Kennedy depended greatly on public support to aid the particular ends of his office. "Once he had the impetus of public support, Kennedy was more apt to gather his own momentum. Without that impetus, he usually wavered or held back. . . ."[14] Thus, the need for conciliation and the necessity to marshall support were key concepts in Kennedy's view of the presidency.

Preservation of democracy was of primary concern to Kennedy before he entered the White House and was a factor of major importance in his view of the office.[15] He considered it the responsibility of executive leadership to educate the public on matters concerning its democratic institutions, even if the information was unsettling. "The American people," he said in a campaign speech in 1959, "have the capacity to accept the harsh facts of our position and respond to them."[16]

Kennedy's Concept of Presidential Crisis Leadership

An important dimension of Kennedy's concept of the presidency involved the responsibility of the president to function as a moral leader of the people; a trait he considered to be inextricably bound to the office and most wisely shown in times of crisis.

To Kennedy, great strength and leadership abilities needed crisis situations to manifest themselves. He maintained in Profiles in Courage that "great crises produce great men and great deeds of courage."[17] It is noteworthy, then, that Kennedy's term in office "was often couched in the language of crisis."[18] In his inaugural address he spoke of the mounting crises Americans would have to withstand. "Each day the crises multiply," Kennedy said. "Each day their

solution grows more difficult. . . . in each of the principle areas of crisis--the tide of events has been running out and time has not been our friend."[19]

In addition to presidential truth-telling and strength in crisis, Kennedy saw the effective presidential leader as one who was singly responsible for executive decisions and the results of those decisions. As the leader of his country, the president was, in Kennedy's words, "alone at the top."[20] Kennedy recognized his duty in this regard on many occasions, but an interesting example of the intensity with which he held this view comes from one of his remarks after the Bay of Pigs crisis. A member of Kennedy's cabinet intended to call a news conference to announce that responsibility for the fiasco belonged to the CIA and the Joint Chiefs. Kennedy was to be exonerated of any blame for the invasion. When he was informed of his cabinet member's intention, Kennedy responded vehemently by saying, "Call that (expletive deleted) and tell him to shut his mouth. I'm the President and I'm responsible for any errors of this administration."[21] While in fact, Kennedy may have been stating a harsh political truism, it appears that the idea of acknowledged, solitary responsibility was an integral part of his conception of strong presidential leadership in crisis.

A Model of International Crisis Speaking--Preliminary Considerations

Windt offers a perspective from which to view presidential international crisis speaking based upon the assumption that "Presidential speeches are repetitive, that the lines of argument a President chooses come from the office of the Presidency and from tradition."[22] He contends that "political crises are primarily rhetorical," and that "situations do not create crises." It is the president's "perception of the situation and the rhetoric he uses to describe it" that mark the event as a crisis.[23] He further argues that the

term crisis first became popularized during the Kennedy administration and was "an inflated description of making hard decisions."[24]

Certainly, the ease with which a president may approach the public via television gives him the undisputed forum from which he may report the crisis and suggest that the situation calls for the kinds of decisive leadership that he will provide.[25] Support for presidential action in crisis situations is usually evoked successfully by such pronouncements. As Nelson Polsby remarks: "Invariably, the popular response to a President during international crises is favorable, regardless of the wisdom of the policies he pursues."[26] Presidential ethos contributes greatly to public support. According to Windt, "People support the President overwhelmingly in these situations because they see the President as the personification of the country."[27] In short, presidential ethos and the American concept of the presidency play important roles in determining acceptance of and support for presidential pronouncements in crises.

Textual Analysis of Kennedy's Crisis Speaking

Windt asserts that "Presidential speeches about international crises begin with an assertion of the President's control over the facts of the situation." The president, according to Windt, acknowledges that these "New Facts . . . constitute a New Situation--a crisis for the United States."[28] Kennedy began his televised report to the nation of the Berlin Crisis by quickly reviewing the "new facts" of the turmoil and stating that these new facts indicated a "new situation" that would have to be remedied. "Seven weeks ago tonight I returned from Europe to report on my meeting with Premier Khrushchev and the others." Krushchev's intended actions, Kennedy continued, would "bring to an end . . . our legal rights to be in West Berlin and . . . our ability to make

good on our commitment to the two million free people of that city. That we cannot permit."[29] Not only are facts cited in this passage, but a preview of their ramifications is given. Kennedy puts himself in the center of action by implying that efforts will be taken to thwart Khrushchev's plan. In a similar manner, Kennedy's introductory remarks of his nationally televised speech on the Cuban Missile Crisis serve to advance "new facts" of the situation and establish the theme of presidential control in crisis. "This government, as promised," Kennedy began, "has maintained the closest surveillance of the Soviet military build-up on the island of Cuba. Within the past week, unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island." Kennedy continued by offering ominously that "The purpose of these bases can be none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere."[30] This statement clearly defines the significant issue at hand and asserts the gravity of the crisis situation through the citation of "new facts." Authoritative statements such as these portray the president as one who is in command of the facts and therefore, as one who is in control of the situation. In Windt's words, "At this point, political leadership is personalized; the course of national policy is rhetorically concentrated in one man."[31]

According to Windt, after the president has demonstrated his knowledge and control over the crisis situation, he begins a full narration of the facts involved and introduces a devil-angel interpretation of events. Thus, in addition to a recounting of the facts, a comparison is developed "between the patience and honesty with which the United States handled the Old Situation versus the enemy's record of duplicity and secrecy in creating the New Situation."[32] The themes of United States honesty and Soviet deception are easily discernable in Kennedy's rhetoric. In his speech on the Berlin Crisis, Kennedy reiterated his

country's willingness to "remove any actual irritants in West Berlin," but cautioned that "the freedom of that city is not negotiable." Total lack of Soviet cooperation in the crisis is implied in his assertion that "We cannot negotiate with those who say, 'What's mine is mine and what's yours is negotiable.'"[33] Kennedy was melodramatic in his claim that the Soviet intention was to seize the rights of the free world and wrest freedom from the people of Berlin. The United States could not permit this to occur; Berlin had become "the great testing place of Western courage and will, a focal point where our solemn commitments . . . and Soviet ambitions now meet in basic confrontation."[34] Again in his address during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy distinguished between the sincere efforts of his country and the dishonest practices of the Soviet Union. He detailed his actions in search of the truth regarding the build up of missiles in Cuba and quoted directly from Soviet statements to the effect that the missiles were placed there solely for defensive purposes. These statements, he said, were false and "Neither the United States of America nor the world community of nations can tolerate deliberate deception and offensive threats on the part of any nation, large or small."[35] At the center of Kennedy's address is yet a more extreme statement regarding Soviet duplicity and the countering resolve of the United States:

> But this secret, swift and extraordinary build-up of Communist missiles, in an area well known to have a special and historical relationship to the United States and the nations of the Western Hemisphere, in violation of Soviet assurances and in defiance of American and hemispheric policy--this sudden, clandestine decision to station strategic weapons for the first time outside of Soviet soil is a deliberately provocative and unjustified change in the

> status quo which cannot be accepted by this country, if our courage and our commitments are ever to be trusted again by either friend or foe.[36]

Thus, in both Kennedy speeches, a basic ideological conflict is exposed. The enemy is seen as sinister and plotting: the United States is seen as well-meaning and determined to right wrongs.

Windt suggests that understanding the rhetorical strategy of identification of ideological conflict is crucial to the process of interpreting responses to presidential crisis speeches. "Insofar as the people believe that the issue is truly an ideological issue . . . they will be disposed to support the President."[37] Kennedy enjoyed public support as a result of both crisis speeches. Following the Berlin Crisis address, the New York Times editorialized that "President Kennedy last night reasserted American leadership of the free world . . . we are confident that the American people and free men everywhere will support him."[38] Support him they did. Although public opinion polls in the months following his address indicated increased American apprehension about the outbreak of war, they also indicated a rise in confidence for Kennedy. Public support followed a similar course for Kennedy after his Cuban Missile Crisis speech. In a poll released two days after the address, George Gallup found that 84 percent of the public approved of Kennedy's actions and only 4 percent disapproved.[39] Both nationally televised addresses succeeded in securing widespread public approval for the president's crisis leadership.

Announcement of presidential policy is embedded within the identification of ideological conflict, according to Windt. Further, as policy is articulated, there is an attempt to "shift the issue from its obvious military and political context to an ethical context . . . from the consequences of war to

a question of American character."[40] Kennedy drew on the American character for support in both crisis speeches under discussion. In his Berlin Crisis address, he made it clear that he would not hesitate to request "more men, or more taxes or more controls, or other new powers . . ." to meet what he termed ". . . this threat to peace." Kennedy stated his awareness of the fact that "many American families will bear the burden of these requests." But, he added, urging support for his ethical argument, "these are burdens which must be borne if freedom is to be defended; Americans have willingly borne them before, and they will not flinch from the task now."[41] The words chosen by Kennedy to evoke a feeling of national character and positive response to his policies in the Cuban Missile Crisis are virtually identical to those that he spoke during his Berlin address. "Let no one doubt," he cautioned, "that this is a difficult and dangerous effort on which we have set out." He warned that unforeseen costs might be incurred in the time ahead and added: "The path we have chosen for the present is full of hazards, as all paths are, but it is the one most consistent with our character and courage as a nation and our commitments around the world. The cost of freedom is always high, but Americans have always paid it."[42] The goal of American efforts, Kennedy concluded, was admirable: "Our goal is not the victory of might, but the vindication of right; not peace at the expense of freedom, but both peace and freedom. . . ."[43]

The obvious end of these kinds of appeals is persuasion of the American public to acceptance of presidential policy. For, as Paper suggests, "the decisive ingredient of presidential leadership is power--not necessarily the power to command . . . but the power to persuade others in the political arena."[44] The source of this power to persuade in times of crisis is twofold. First, the notion of presidential expertise in the situation renders the

impression that only the president can "slay the dragons of crisis."[45] A second source of support for presidential policy in crisis arises from placement of the issue in an ethical context. The American public is told, in effect, that "those who support the President have character and courage, . . . that those who oppose him lack these virtues."[46] It seems that transformation of the issue at stake in the crisis from a fairly simple, objective, if possibly threatening entity, to one that is attached to and embodied by national virtue is an effective rhetorical strategy. It is, after all, "difficult sometimes for Americans to differentiate between loyalty to president and loyalty to nation."[47]

The purpose of presidential crisis rhetoric may not be, as Senator Vandenberg claimed, "to scare the hell out of the country";[48] its primary goal appears to be the unification of the American people in support of presidential policy. Public discussion of the subject is not sought. Rather, the effect of this explanatory and support-seeking rhetoric is to "limit, if not destroy, reasonable public discussion of policy."[49] It is important to realize that while the American public might have devoted the time necessary for discussion of strategies in the Berlin or Cuban crises, time was not available. Similarly, the wise and expedient course of action in crisis is what Kennedy sought. Paper argues that "He genuinely appreciated the need for a public fully informed on the issues of the day and on the options available to the government," but was one who sought to "avoid public discussion for the sake of expediency."[50] Though he possessed great skill in gauging public opinion, he "regarded the American people more as spectators than participants. . . . He wanted their approval and their support, but not their judgment or their action."[51]

Kennedy's crisis speaking follows the pattern described by Windt and, in addition, it corresponds both to American and Kennedy's own conceptions of

presidential leadership. If, indeed, the American president is seen as the personification of the American public, one could not find a more illustrative example of this kind of identification than in Kennedy's crisis rhetoric. In both speeches under consideration, Kennedy joined the idea of his will and wishes for resolution of the crises with those of the American citizenry. He put himself in the position of moral leader and spokesman for the nation by casting the issues under discussion in the mold of basic democratic ideology. Kennedy fulfilled his role as public educator while simultaneously urging support for his policies in the hours of crisis and conflict between Cold War antagonists. Finally, this analysis reveals that Kennedy's rhetoric performed well in his moments of crisis. His speeches succeeded in securing the approval of the American people that he deemed so necessary and he triumphed in demonstrating the courage he so highly admired in great leaders. He did, indeed, appear in these moments to be a watchman "on the walls of world freedom."[52]

Notes

[1]John F. Kennedy, Public Papers: 1963 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1964), p. 894. Excerpt taken from the speech Kennedy would have delivered to the Dallas Citizens Council on the afternoon of November 22, 1963.

[2]Clinton Rossiter, The American Presidency (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960), p. 40.

[3]Rossiter, p. 108.

[4]Quoted in Lewis J. Paper, The Promise and the Performance (New York: Crown, 1975), p. 9.

[5]See James W. Pratt, "An Analysis of Three Crisis Speeches," Western Speech, 34 (1970), pp. 194-203, and Theodore Otto Windt, Jr., "The Presidency and Speeches on International Crises: Repeating the Rhetorical Past," Speaker and Gavel, 2 (1973), pp. 6-14. At the heart of the controversy between the two articles lies the issue of Kennedy's crisis speaking differing from that of other presidents. Pratt contends that it is distinctly different while Windt maintains that it is rhetorically similar to that of previous presidents.

[6]The following texts were used for these two major crisis speeches: Berlin Crisis, John W. Gardner, ed., To Turn the Tide (New York: Harper, 1962), pp. 188-198. Cuban Quarantine, Allan Nevins, ed., The Burden and the Glory (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 89-96.

[7]Rossiter, pp. 18-19.

[8]Quoted in Paper, p. 196.

[9]Thomas E. Cronin, "Superman, Our Textbook President," Washington Monthly, Oct. 1970, p. 52.

[10]Theodore C. Sorensen, The Kennedy Legacy (New York: Macmillan Co., 1969), p. 70.

[11]Paper, p. 7.

[12]Paper, p. 29.

[13]John F. Kennedy, Profiles in Courage (New York: Harper and Row, 1955), p. 5.

[14]Paper, p. 95.

[15]John F. Kennedy, Why England Slept (New York: W. Funk, 1940), pp. 180-181. Kennedy argued that the leaders' educational roles to arouse the public in time of danger had been unfulfilled in pre-war England. He suggested that all democratic institutions need to be protected by public awareness.

[16]John F. Kennedy, The Strategy of Peace (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 105.

[17]Kennedy, Profiles in Courage, p. 49.

[18]Bruce Miroff, Pragmatic Illusions: The Presidential Politics of John F. Kennedy (New York: David McKay, 1976), p. 15.

[19]John F. Kennedy, Public Papers: 1961 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1962), pp. 22-23.

[20]Tom Wicker, J.F.K. and L.B.J.: The Influence of Personality upon Politics (New York: William Morrow, 1968), p. 25.

[21]Quoted in Pierre Salinger, "J.F.K.'s White House: I'm the President," Washington Post, May 31, 1974, p. A26.

[22]Windt, p. 6.

[23]Windt, p. 7.

[24]Windt, p. 7.

[25]Kennedy did not hesitate to use television for public education during crises. See Paper, p. 234.

[26]Quoted in Thomas E. Cronin, "The Textbook Presidency and Political Science," prepared for delivery at the 66th Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Los Angeles, California, September 7-12, 1970, p. 5.

[27]Windt, p. 8.

[28]Windt, p. 9.

[29]Gardner, To Turn the Tide, pp. 188-189.

[30]Nevins, The Burden and the Glory, p. 89.

[31]Windt, p. 10.

[32]Windt, p. 10.

[33]Gardner, p. 194.

[34]Gardner, p. 190.

[35]Nevins, p. 91.

[36]Nevins, p. 92.

[37]Windt, p. 11.

[38]The New York Times, July 26, 196', p. 30.

[39]Paper, p. 92.

[40]Windt, p. 11.

[41]Gardner, p. 193.

[42]Nevins, p. 95.

[43]Nevins, p. 96.

[44]Paper, p. 11.

[45]Cronin, "Superman, Our Textbook President," p. 51.

[46]Windt, p. 12.

[47]Cronin, "Superman, Our Textbook President," p. 52.

[48]Quoted in Windt, p. 13.

[49]Windt, p. 13.

[50]Paper, p. 366.

[51]Miroff, p. 24.

[52]John F. Kennedy, Public Papers: 1963, p. 894.